

Talking with young people about mental health

A practical toolkit for school-based youth support roles

May 2026

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Introduction

This toolkit has been developed for roles supporting youth mental health in schools including:

- school counsellors
- school psychologists
- wellbeing coordinators
- youth engagement staff

It is also for organisations delivering mental health programs in schools.

School staff often have frequent, trusted interactions with young people and play a critical role in supporting mental health care. Relationships with trusted adults in schools form a protective factor for students' mental health and wellbeing. This practical resource is designed to provide guidance and resources to support you in your role.

How to use this toolkit

This online toolkit provides information to support young people aged between 13 to 18 years. All information linked is from evidence-based and trusted sources.

You can read the sections in order, or on their own.

The toolkit is designed to integrate into existing wellbeing programs and role-specific policies and procedures.

Note: It is beyond the scope of the document to provide detailed information about assessment and diagnosis of mental health conditions. Remember, it is important to always work within the scope of your role, level of expertise and professional code. Seek advice from colleagues when required.



Section 1

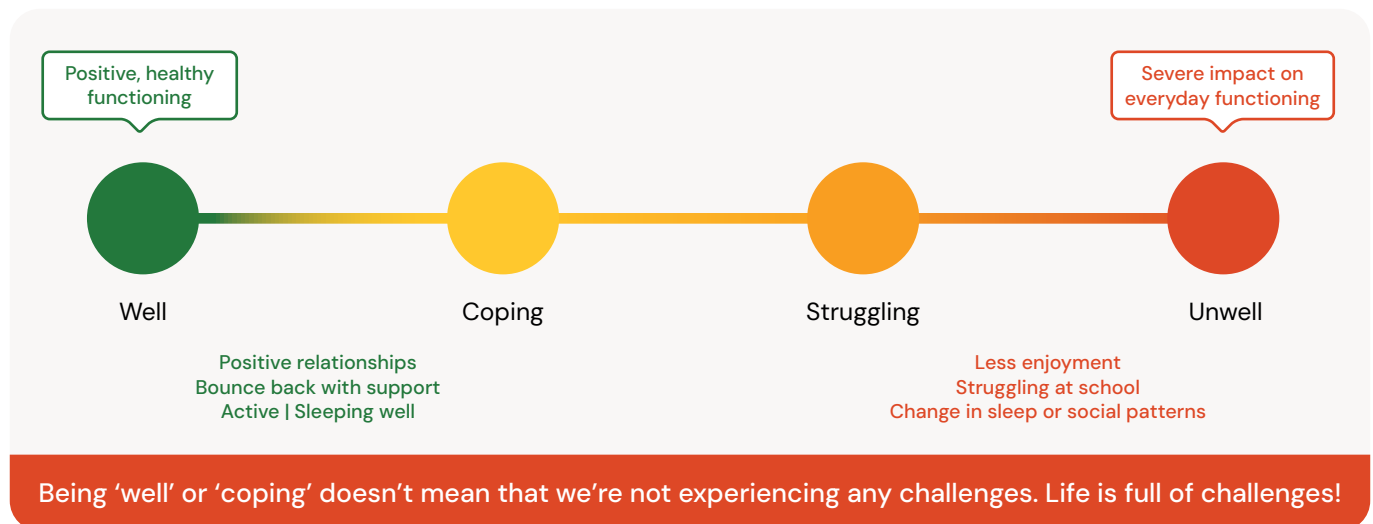
Understanding mental
health and wellbeing



Understanding mental health

Mental health is a way of describing social and emotional wellbeing. It affects how young people adjust to change, develop relationships and deal with life's challenges.

Mental health and wellbeing vary across our lives. It can be useful to think about mental health and wellbeing as existing along a broad continuum that ranges from well to unwell.¹ As a support person you might find it useful to share this framework with the young person you are working with.



Well or coping for young people, is when they:

- can bounce back from challenges with support.
- generally have good relationships with friends and family.
- have healthy routines around activity, food, and sleep.

Struggling is when we notice changes from their usual behaviour, for example:

- a change in emotions.
- not enjoying the things they usually enjoy.
- withdrawing from social activities.

Unwell is when these changes in behaviour start to cause distress. It is also when a young person feels they can no longer function as usual with everyday tasks.

Signs that might indicate when a young person is struggling with their mental health or becoming unwell are listed on page 6 in this section. The earlier we can notice a change in behaviour indicating that a young person may be struggling, the sooner we can assist them to get the support they need. Getting the right help early can reduce the impact on everyday life and lead to a quicker recovery. Signs that a young person may be struggling with their mental health are covered on pages 9 and 10.

1. Keyes, 2002


Early identification and treatment is important

- Nearly 40% of 16 to 24 year-olds experience a mental health condition each year.²
- An estimated 50% of adult mental illness begins before 14 years of age.³

School staff have a role to play in promoting positive wellbeing and mental health for students. It requires a team approach with clarity about roles, responsibilities and clear communication pathways. All these actions can help with prevention, early detection, and access to evidence-based treatment during this critical developmental period.



2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2024
3. National Mental Health Commission, 2023



How to support young people's mental health and wellbeing

Make your role clear

School environments typically have hierarchical relationships between students and teachers, and a focus on academic achievement. This means it is important to clearly explain your role and that your relationship/support will be different than the typical student-teacher dynamic. Being clear about the limits of confidentiality and the reasons for this at the start of a conversation are also crucial to build trust and maintain safety.

Important information to provide:

- explanation of your role in the school
- purpose of the conversation
- participation in the conversation is optional
- collaborative nature of the supportive relationship
- how confidentiality is protected, including record keeping and storage of files (where relevant)
- limits of confidentiality and why and how this is managed.

Support strategies

The following strategies form part of supportive interventions to help with:

- the early identification of mental health struggles
- preventing mental health struggles from increasing
- promoting protective factors.

Connect and build relationships: Having positive relationships with trusted adults can be a protective factor for young people. Building and maintaining positive relationships can make it easier for you to notice behaviour changes that indicate a mental health struggle. Strong relationships can create a safe starting point for a mental health check-in. You can provide continued support by regularly and informally checking-in. This can even be outside times of obvious struggle, when a student seems to be 'well'.

Notice and initiate a check-in conversation: This can show that you care and are there to support them. It can also help you collect more information to determine if other supports are needed. More information in Section 3.

Know what support options are available: This could include what your school can offer. It may also include:

- other school-based resources
- referral pathways to external services in your area
- self-help resources
- digital resources.

More information in Section 3.

Support adaptive coping strategies: This life stage is full of change and experimentation. For more information about how to support the development of mentally healthy habits and adaptive coping strategies see Section 5.

Signs to look out for in young people struggling with their mental health

Physical

You may notice some of these signs yourself. A student (or someone supporting them) may also raise these signs with you.

- Changes in appetite and weight, including weight gain or loss
- Appearing sleepy, reporting not getting enough sleep, struggling to get out of bed or sleeping too much
- Looking unkempt – for example, poor hygiene or wearing dirty clothes
- Frequent physical complaints, such as stomach aches, headaches, diarrhoea
- Signs of harm on the body including cuts and bruises

Emotional

- Changes in mood or personality, including feeling irritable, sad, worried or angry a lot of the time
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness
- Less interest or pleasure in things they usually enjoy

Behavioural

- A drop in performance at school or work, including difficulties with concentration
- Trouble connecting with others their own age
- Trouble connecting with family, friends and partners
- Withdrawing from others, not going out as much, or not going to school or work
- Getting involved/increasing risky behaviours like:
 - using alcohol or other drugs
 - lashing out at family, friends, partners and support staff
 - being destructive (for example property damage, self-harm)
 - spending time with new people (who also carry out risky behaviours)

Thoughts

- Expressing that life isn't worth living
- Low self-esteem or having a poor view of themselves and their future
- Reporting unusual or distressing thoughts that are impacting on their life

Sometimes it can be hard to notice changes in behaviour from normal reactions to challenges. It is important to look for multiple signs that behaviour has changed. When a young person is struggling, these behaviours don't go away and will continue to impact their routine and ability to carry out regular tasks.

Commonly occurring mental health issues

While there are a range of mental health issues impacting young people, anxiety and depression are the most common and can often co-occur.

Symptoms of problematic anxiety usually appear during childhood, whereas symptoms of depression tend to emerge between 13 and 15 years of age.

In this section, we provide information about depression and anxiety. In your role, however, it's not necessary to determine or know the diagnosis of the type of mental health struggle a young person is experiencing to support them. In section 3, we provide the key steps you can take to support a young person. Note if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts there are different steps which are covered in section 2.

Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is a normal response to stress, loss, or a big challenge/change in our lives. It is a universal emotion that can show up for everyone. While unpleasant, anxiety can sometimes motivate us to do better. It can help us to focus our attention which might help us perform a task better.

Given anxiety is universal and can be helpful, it can be hard to know when it is becoming problematic. However, it's one of the most common mental health concerns in children and young people.

Anxiety becomes a problem when:

- You feel it often
- It won't go away
- It interferes with everyday life (e.g., going to school, socialising with friends, separating from parents).

Signs of anxiety to look out for in young people

Physical

- Appearing sleepy, reporting not getting enough sleep
- Frequent physical complaints, such as stomach aches, headaches, diarrhoea

Emotional

- Irritability
- Inability to relax
- Extreme self-consciousness or sensitivity to criticism

Thoughts

- Constant worry
- Perfectionism or excessively high expectations
- Expressing anxious thoughts about themselves, their situation or the future. For example, "I can't cope", "What if something bad happens?"
- Difficulty concentrating or appearing distracted

Behaviour

- Repeated reassurance-seeking
- Social isolation and problems with relationships
- Withdrawal from social activity
- Increase substance use
- Avoiding making decisions

Understanding depression

Depression is more than just feeling upset or sad. It is different from sadness which is usually a response to something in your life. For example, a young person feels sad after not receiving an invitation to a party. The feeling will pass over time and may start to shift after using helpful coping strategies.

Depression is a serious mental illness which makes coping with day-to-day life difficult. It can leave you feeling irritable, or sad most of the day, almost every day. It can be difficult to tell the difference between the ups and downs of being a young person. Depression is when feelings of sadness, emptiness and irritability last longer than two weeks. It is when it affects most parts of a young person's daily life. This includes school, work, hobbies and relationships. It can stop them from doing things that they used to enjoy.

Signs of depression to look out for in young people

Physical

- Not feeling like eating or increased appetite
- Change to sleep, including difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- Not having any energy
- Frequent physical complaints, such as stomach aches, headaches, body pain, fatigue

Emotional

- Tearfulness or frequent crying
- Being easily irritated or angry for no reason
- Feeling empty or numb
- Feeling on edge or worried

Thoughts

- Having negative thoughts about themselves and the world, e.g. "I'm a failure", "I'm bad", "Nothing ever good happens to me".
- Having thoughts about wanting to die or hurt themselves
- Experiencing difficulties with their concentration

Behaviour

- Withdrawing socially
- Not feeling like showering or getting dressed
- Stop enjoying things that used to be fun
- Performance at school has declined



Section 2

Suicide, self-harm and risk



Suicidal thoughts and behaviours and self-harm

Suicidal thoughts and feelings are distressing for the young person and their family members. These thoughts are also described as suicidal ideation and are relatively common with 30% of 12 to 20 year-olds experiencing them at some point.

They can be a sign of temporary stress and the feeling that things are just too hard, and you've run out of options. When suicidal thoughts include a decision to die and a plan of how to die (also described as suicidal intent) this can lead to a suicide attempt and death.

Take all signs of suicidal thoughts and behaviour seriously and ask directly if they are thinking about suicide. We now know that asking directly is the most helpful approach and does not put ideas in someone's head, in fact it helps prevent suicide.

Self-harm is deliberately hurting oneself through behaviours like burning, cutting, scratching, hitting, suffocation, overdosing and risky behaviours, e.g. playing chicken with cars or trains, starting fights etc. It is also referred to as non-suicidal self-injury as its different from attempting suicide, where the intent is to die or to permanently end unbearable pain.

Young people often self-harm because they feel they can't cope with their feelings or a situation in any other way. In some cases, young people have learned self-harm from others. While some young people may self-harm to communicate their distress, it is rarely used as a means of seeking attention due to the shame most young people feel about it.



- Self-harm is a sign of distress.
- A minor injury does not mean minor distress.
- All self-harm needs to be taken seriously and requires the support of trusted adults and health professionals.

If a young person talks about hurting themselves or acts in ways that suggest they might be thinking about suicide or self-harm, it's important that they feel supported, heard and assisted to get the help they need. This will include a comprehensive mental health assessment to determine the level of support they require to keep them safe and to respond to their distress.

Ensure you are familiar with:

- the most appropriate referral options for a mental health assessment in your school. This is generally done by a member of the school counselling service
- what is within the scope of your role (in relation to mental health assessments)
- the relevant policies and procedures for responding to self-harm and suicidality



In the case of an emergency, contact 000 for life-threatening or time-critical situations or your State/Territory Government's Mental Health Support Service.

Consider accessing training to increase your confidence in responding to risk in your role.

Trusted training providers

Black Dog Institute

Recognise and Respond – One hour online course

Youth in Distress – Online or face to face workshops

Living Works

safeTALK – Four hour workshop

Wesley Mission

Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Training – Half day workshop



Safety planning

Safety planning is an evidence-based approach that provides practical, individualised strategies to be used by an individual and their support people to manage suicidal thoughts and feelings.⁴ It has been shown to reduce the intensity of suicidal thoughts and increase people's ability to cope with them. It includes identifying:

- Triggers
- Warning signs
- Where to get help
- How others can help
- Self-help strategies
- Reasons for living
- What to do in a crisis.

A safety plan is part of a broader strategy to support someone when they are experiencing suicidal thoughts and feelings. It does not take the place of and should be used in conjunction with a comprehensive mental health and suicidality assessment.

If a young person discloses suicidal thoughts and feelings, you could ask them if they have ever done a safety plan before or have an existing safety plan. This could be used to help access coping strategies while putting in place a referral for an assessment and increased support.

The Beyond Now Safety Planning app is a useful resource to familiarise yourself with. It provides a template and a structure to develop a safety plan. Available as an app or web version.

4. Nuij et al., 2021

Young people at increased risk of mental health struggles

Some young people are disproportionately affected by poor mental health. These groups face higher risks due to factors like discrimination, stress, social isolation, and limited access to appropriate, culturally sensitive support. These groups may include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people
- LGBTIQ+
- Young people in out-of-home care
- Young people with disability or chronic illnesses
- Youth from multicultural backgrounds
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Young people living in rural and remote areas
- Youth experiencing trauma, abuse, or family violence
- Youth facing socioeconomic disadvantage such as homelessness or unemployment.

It is important to be mindful that young people may belong to one or more of these groups without us knowing and we can't always assume that young people will feel comfortable and safe enough to share their situation with us.

Make sure you have knowledge of appropriate referral pathways to support young people from priority populations.

Note: Before recommending online resources and apps ensure you are familiar with them and have a solid working knowledge. When introducing them to a young person, show them in session, discuss when and how to use them and follow up on their experience at the next opportunity. Online resources and apps that have built-in reminders help prompt uptake. If this feature isn't available discuss how they'll remember to use it.



Resources to support young people from priority groups

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
Online Health and wellbeing workers	WellMob Designed for front line health and wellbeing workers, WellMob is a portal to find online resources made by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
	Transhub Educators Provides tips about how to best support a trans person as well as references and links to other LGBTQIA+ organisations.
	Disability Gateway Online gateway to find mental health support services in each state for people with disabilities.
Online Young people	Yarn Safe Designed to connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people 12–25 years, with the mental health services they need, helping them through issues related to physical health, mental health, drugs, alcohol, work, and study.
	SANE Australia SANE offers a range of free digital and telehealth support services for people over 18 years of age with complex mental health needs.
Online and telephone Peer support	QLife Online and telephone support, information, peer support, and referral services for LGBTQIA+ individuals, their families, and friends
Fact sheet	Beyond Blue – Looking after your mental health while living with a disability Information about how living with a disability can contribute to anxiety and depression.
Online Community resource	Embrace Multicultural Mental Health A national platform providing mental health services and multicultural communities with access to resources, links to services, and information.



Section 3

Conversations and support



How to initiate a check-in conversation

Supporting a student's wellbeing is a shared responsibility across staff members. Anyone can initiate a check-in conversation with a young person. Especially if you have noticed changes in behaviour or signs of struggling.

A check-in conversation involves:

- letting them know that you care and are available to support them.
- asking the young person for more information. This can help you determine extra supports they might need.
- planning the next steps to support them.

Things to keep in mind when initiating a check-in conversation

Setting it up

- Think about the best time to schedule a chat. Make sure it isn't a time when either of you will be distracted, have other commitments or be rushed for time.
- Have a plan of what you'd like to achieve in the conversation. This could be communicating that you have noticed some signs they are struggling or simply wanting to collect more information.
- Invite the young person for a conversation and explain your role and the purpose of the check-in conversation.
- Remember trust and safety are built at the start by explaining that the conversation is optional, how confidentiality is protected, the limits to confidentiality and how this is managed.
- Choose a private, comfortable place.
- Allow enough time to properly talk about their mental wellbeing.

Start the conversation

- To start the conversation, you can use a sentence like "I've noticed you don't seem your usual self. You usually smile and say hi to everyone. I just wanted to check in with you and see how you are going". This can help explain:
 - the change in behaviour you have noticed
 - the purpose of the conversation.
- Encourage them to talk by using open-ended questions, e.g., "What can you tell me about it?"
- If they're reluctant to talk, ask a few more questions.
- If they still don't want to talk, offer to check in with them at another time or see if there is someone else they'd prefer to speak to. Discuss how to set this up. Make sure you follow up afterwards to ensure that it happens and to consider what further help might be required.

During the conversation – Listen and understand

- Listen actively and allow them to talk. Don't interrupt or offer advice straight away.
- Avoid the temptation to fill the silences.
- When appropriate, reflect on some of what you've heard to show you understand. e.g. "So, you've been really struggling getting up in the mornings?"

Plan next steps

- Discuss helpful coping strategies including options for support and self-help.
- Encourage the young person by asking what they plan to do next.
- Help them decide on the first step towards a solution.
- Offer your practical support at this stage, ask what you can do to help to find a solution.

Finish the conversation

- Set a date to follow-up with them e.g. a week later.
- Encourage them to reach out to you or someone they trust if they are feeling worse and/or the strategies you've put in place are not enough.
- In the follow-up, ask them how they are and what steps they've managed to take since your initial conversation.
- If you had agreed to find out more information for the student or provide some sort of practical support, make sure that you've made a start on it.

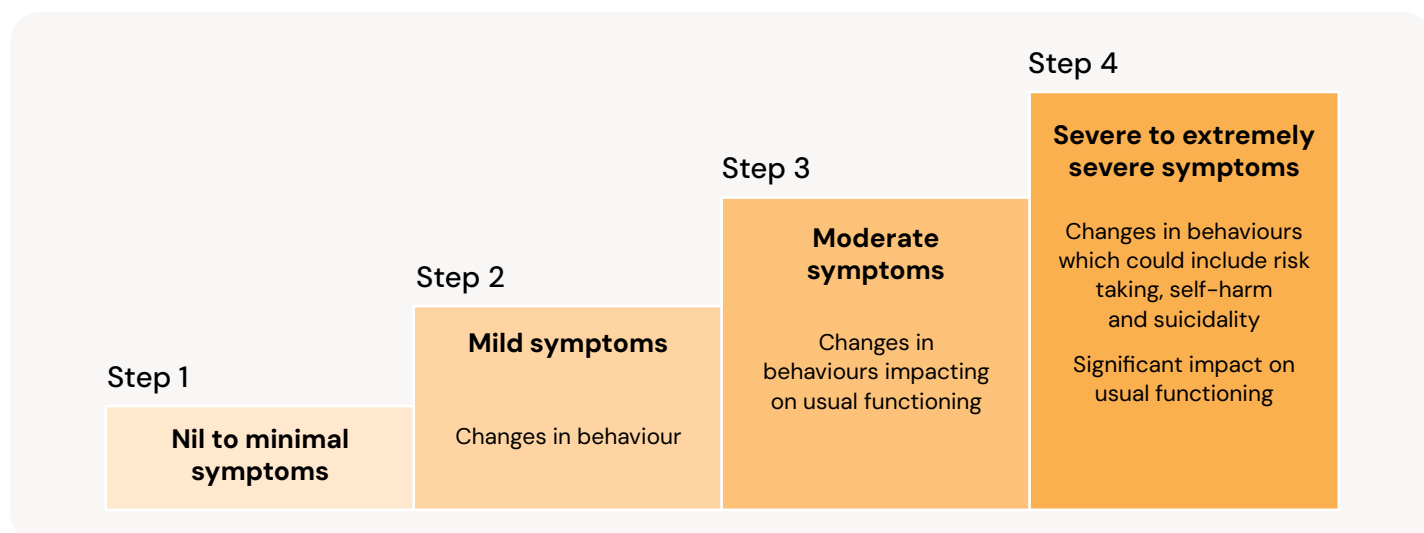


Matching support with the young person's needs

To work out the support a young person needs, we recommend using the 'stepped care' approach.⁵ This is an evidence-based model that can help guide the level of support a young person requires.

The level of support is determined by the changes you see in a young person's behaviour as well as their response to a wellbeing check-in. For mental health staff, level of support is determined by severity of symptoms.

Right level of care at the right time



The model recommends that when a young person's needs increase, so does:

- the level of support needed
- the professional skills of those providing support.

Response to support is monitored and the intensity is 'stepped up' if you can't see/notice improvement.

As a young person responds to support and starts to improve, the intervention may also be 'stepped down', with continued monitoring.

Young people experiencing changes in behaviour that are not yet impacting on their usual functioning may respond to:

- regular wellbeing check-ins
- validating and normalising their feelings where appropriate
- encouraging the use of healthy coping strategies. This could include sharing fact sheets and digital resources.

Young people at Step 3 and 4 would benefit from the support mentioned above as well as referral for additional mental health support.

5. Cross et al., 2017

Assessing severity

If it is within the scope of your role, measuring the severity of symptoms will help indicate the level of intervention required and provide a baseline from which to monitor response to treatment. This could be as simple as asking for level of distress on a 10-point-scale, assessing impairment of functioning across key life domains or a formal assessment tool.

Informal

- On a scale of 0 to 10, how much distress is this causing you at the moment?
- How would you rate the impact of this on you at the moment – mild, moderate or severe?
- What percentage of the time is this causing problems for you at home, at school, and with your friends?

Functional impairment

Based on their self-report determining level of functional impairment.

How much does this affect you at school, at home, with your friends?

- Mild impairment in functioning: distressed by the symptoms, some difficulty in continuing with ordinary work and social activities which can be done with extra effort.
- Moderate: considerable difficulty in continuing with schoolwork, social and family activities.
- Severe: most aspects of functioning at home, school and socially are severely impaired.

Formal assessment tools

Given the comorbidity between anxiety and depression, using a scale that assesses for both can be helpful. Formal assessment tools may not be appropriate to use for young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales – Youth (Szabo & Lovibond, 2022)

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales for Youth is a 21-item self-report instrument designed to measure a core set of symptoms that define depression, anxiety and stress for age 8–18 years. The stress scale is associated with worrying in children and adolescents from ages 10–11 years onwards.

The Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (Chorpita et al., 2015)

The Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) is a 47-item, youth self-report questionnaire with subscales including: separation anxiety disorder (SAD), social phobia (SP), generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder (PD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and major depressive disorder (MDD). It is for ages 8–18 years and includes a parent report scale.

A brief version of the instrument is available (RCADS-25) which yields three scores: Total Anxiety, Total Depression, and Total Anxiety and Depression.

Support options

While all members of the school community have a role to play in promoting positive wellbeing and mental health of students, there are specialised roles and services to provide support to student at risk of or who are experiencing struggles with their mental health.

It is important to understand the various roles and referral pathways. This helps you determine who is best placed to provide support and intervention at your school or externally.

Consider the following example

The Year 9 advisor asks for your advice about Thea. They have recently had a relationship break up, which has disrupted the friendship group they used to hang out with. The advisor has noticed they are sitting alone during breaks, looking tired, and is less engaged in class discussions.

What step would they be on the stepped care model?
Step 3 as Thea is experiencing changes in behaviour that are impacting on their usual functioning.
What support would they most benefit from?
Check-in conversation by the year advisor or another staff member with a relationship with Thea. Referral for additional support, for example, the school counselling service or an external psychological treatment service.
Who at your school would provide this support? How would you initiate a referral?
If you're not sure, talk with a colleague.
What role would you have in supporting this student?
This will depend on the nature of your relationship with Thea and your role in the school. It's important that a staff member is allocated to follow up and check-in with Thea to ensure she has received the appropriate support and if further support is required.

How to talk about treatment options (medication and psychosocial)

You may have the opportunity to share some information about treatment options in your conversation.

Fact sheets for young people about these options can be [found here](#).

Useful information to share about treatment options

There are many ways to get back to feeling better after struggling with mental health. Engaging in healthy coping strategies like connecting with others, getting good sleep, learning new techniques and being more active can be helpful on their own or in combination with psychological therapy and medicine. Some young people may benefit from extra support with psychological therapy, medicine or both.

About psychological therapies

Psychological therapies can help young people to understand their feelings and thoughts, making it easier to cope with life's challenges and improve their mental well-being. They work well for depression, anxiety, and stress. There are many different types, and a GP can talk through the options to best suit someone's circumstances. Psychological therapies are generally the first treatment options used before a medicine would be considered.

It can take time to find a therapist or an appointment. Some therapies may have out-of-pocket costs. Treatment can be in person, via telehealth, or a digital mental health treatment program. There is more information about digital programs in the next section. A mental health treatment plan from a GP and can help with costs of psychological care.

The therapy may take 4 to 6 weeks to start working before the person begins to feel better. Attending appointments frequently and feeling comfortable with the therapist are important factors for effectiveness.

About medicines

It's important to remember that most of the time depression and/or anxiety won't need to be treated with medicine. But sometimes a GP, psychiatrist, or nurse practitioner will prescribe medicine as treatment.

Antidepressants are the most common type of medicine prescribed for treatment of depression and anxiety that has not responded to psychological therapy.

They work best when used with healthy coping strategies and psychological therapy.

Let the young person know there will be a health check before anything is prescribed, and to be honest about their use of alcohol or other drugs, as some medicines don't mix well with them.

It's important that young people know:

- Medicines can have side effects.
- Before deciding to take a medicine, they should learn about the potential side effects from their doctor or pharmacist.
- To let their doctor or pharmacist know if they are having side effects.
- Not to stop taking their medicine suddenly, and to talk to their doctor first about stopping the medicine and how best to do this, for example, slowly lowering the dose.
- To not share medicines with someone else.
- The correct way to store their medicine (e.g. not in direct sunlight).



Section 4

Online supports



Digital mental health resources and AI

One important option for care in mild to moderate mental health conditions is self-help delivered online, with or without professional support.

Young people concerned about mental health are increasingly turning to online, mobile or phone-based platforms for help. It's important to be aware of what is available so you can help direct them to safe, credible, and evidence-based resources.

Digital mental health resources can be used alone or in combination with individual interventions and/or medications. They are useful for people who:

- can't access individual treatment.
- need support while waiting for individual treatment.
- have difficulty communicating or processing information, social anxiety, and chronic illness (and can't easily attend in person appointments).

They can also be useful to bridge support gaps in between health professional appointments or continue support if they have stopped seeing a health professional in person.

A note about AI chatbots for mental health support

Chatbots have the potential to support mental health therapies however there is a lack of clear guidelines and regulations around their use and the potential risks they pose e.g. AI chatbots may endorse harmful behaviours.

- Choose wisely
- Understand the limitations of chatbots
- Chatbots aren't a replacement for a trained mental health professional
- Seek human connection, social support and professional therapy

Digital mental health resources

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
<p>Online and telephone counselling, forums and resources</p>	<p>Kids Helpline Free, confidential phone and online counselling for 5 to 25 year olds. Information about mental health, wellbeing and support.</p>
	<p>headspace Free, confidential phone and online counselling for 12 to 25 year olds. Information about mental health, wellbeing and life stressors.</p>
	<p>SANE Australia SANE offers a range of free digital and telehealth support services for people over 18 years of age with complex mental health needs.</p>
	<p>ReachOut Online mental health resource for young people, free practical support, tools and tips and forums. Resources and support for parents.</p>
	<p>QLife Anonymous, free LGBTIQ+ peer support via webchat or phone, for people wanting to talk about sexuality, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.</p>
	<p>Beyond Blue Beyond Blue offers 24/7 free and confidential counselling online or phone, community forums and general information about mental health.</p>
<p>Online program</p>	<p>BRAVE Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An online program to help anxious children and adolescents understand and manage their anxiety. • Separate sections for children to do with their parents and for adolescents to do on their own or with parental involvement.
	<p>THIS WAY UP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teen worry and sadness program • Student wellbeing for tertiary students

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
Online portal	<p>Medicare Mental Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online gateway to find digital mental health services from Australia’s trusted mental health organisations. • Apps, online forums, websites, phone service for adults and young people
	<p>Disability Gateway Mental Health and Wellbeing</p> <p>Online gateway to help find mental health support services for people with disabilities available in each state.</p>
Apps	<p>Beyond Now suicide safety planning app</p> <p>Lifeline</p> <p>Free app to use alone or with a support person to develop a personal plan to cope with suicidal thoughts and feelings.</p>
Fact sheet	<p>13YARN</p> <p>Fact sheets with information and advice about depression, anxiety and challenging times.</p>



Section 5

Coping strategies



Resources to support healthy coping strategies

Supporting young people to learn and use helpful coping strategies when they are struggling with their mental health can be empowering and increase independence. It can also help to reduce unhelpful behaviours that can make anxiety and depression worse.

This can involve asking questions about how they are currently managing their distress, what have they tried in the past, and who they get support from. For example, some ways of asking this could include:

- “It sounds like things have been really tough, what do you think is getting you through?”
- “When you had experienced tough times in the past, what helped you then?”
- “We all find our ways to cope; some are more helpful than others. Some people focus on other things, some people turn to their friends, some people retreat to their rooms. What do you tend to do when you feel like this?”
- “When you’re having a hard time what helps?”
- “Who do you turn to for support?”

The following pages have helpful coping strategies and resources to support these. Make sure you review the resources before you recommend them to understand if they are relevant and appropriate for the young person’s circumstances. Talking through the resource together might help you both work through anything that is unclear and increase the young person’s accountability to change. Follow up with the young person about their experience of using it next time you see them.

Enhancing social connections

The high rates of loneliness among young people today are a risk factor for mental health challenges. There are no quick fixes, but supporting young people to strengthen their social connections is a great start.

Recognise the value and opportunities in connections across lots of different sources. Positive connections that benefit a young person’s wellbeing could include same-aged peers, older or younger peers, family, teachers, coach, elders, neighbours, community groups and pets/animals.

When there are challenges with same-aged peer relationships, strengthening and valuing these other connections can help to reduce feelings of isolation. For First Nations peoples this may extend to include spiritual connections and connections to land and community. However, many young people may also benefit from deepening their connections with the environment and the community groups they belong to.

Supporting interests and encouraging extracurricular activities

Promote participation in clubs, volunteering, and activities to facilitate connections with others who share similar passions.

Promote safe online connections

Safe, online connections can be just as valuable as in person. Sometimes young people need to use online spaces to avoid isolation if they are based in rural areas or belong to minority communities. Young people can connect with like-minded peers through moderated forums such as the ones in the table.

Online forums for young people

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
<p>Online forum</p>	<p>MyCircle</p> <p>Kids Helpline’s dedicated online community for young people aged 13–25 years across Australia. It’s a free, private and confidential space supported by Kids Helpline counsellors.</p>
	<p>MOST</p> <p>A free, safe, digital mental health service for young people aged 12–25 years. It offers access to a supportive online community, peer, career and clinical support, and tools to help manage mental health. Young people 15–25 years can sign up online via the MOST app or website.</p>
	<p>headspace Online Communities</p> <p>A moderated space for young people to share resources and support each other. It offers peer-led group chats on a range of topics, and dedicated spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, the LGBTQIA+ community, and adults supporting young people.</p>
	<p>Beyond Blue Online Forums</p> <p>Discussion forums on dealing with depression, mood disorders and anxiety. All ages.</p>
<p>Additional resources to share:</p>	<p>headspace</p> <p>How to understand and deal with loneliness.</p>
	<p>Kids Helpline</p> <p>Dealing with loneliness.</p>

Encouraging physical activity

Research shows that the more moderate-to-vigorous physical activity you do, the lower the symptoms of anxiety, depression and distress can be.⁶ Moderate-vigorous exercise is any kind of physical activity that raises your heart rate and you find challenging. Moving more can help when young people are starting to struggle with their mental health. It's important that we separate being more physically active from structured exercise and weight loss due to potentially negative experiences and an overfocus on body image.

Some approaches to help young people increase their physical activity:

- Move away from the traditional ideas of exercise to any activity that encourages moving more.
- Remember that moderate-to-vigorous exercise will be different for everyone, especially if you have pain or disabilities that make being active difficult.
- Remember physical activity can be expensive. Try to encourage free or low-cost ideas if you don't know how much the young person can spend.
- Encourage team activities to promote social connection.
- Find something that is fun and can be done with friends.
- Find apps to support activities e.g. step counter, yoga poses, dance music.
- Start from a position of curiosity – set up an “experiment” to explore the impact of moving more on how they feel.



6. Wanjau et al., 2023

Resources – Physical activity

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
Fact sheet	headspace Stay active for a healthy headspace for young people.
Online article	Raising Children Network Physical activity at 9–18 years: what, how much and why.
	Butterfly Foundation – Tips for educators Helping students to develop a positive relationship with physical activity.
Guidelines	Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing Guidelines for healthy growth and development for children and young people (5–17yrs).
	Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing Physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines.

Resources – Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) strategies

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
Apps	ClearlyMe is a free app designed for teens aged 12–17 who are experiencing depressive symptoms and psychological distress. Based on CBT the app provides coping strategies and tools to overcome negative thinking, low mood, difficulties relaxing and maintaining motivation. Click for more information. Available of the App store and Google Play

Challenging unhelpful thinking

Core to CBT is understanding how the link between thoughts, feelings, and behaviour can help. The following resources help identify unhelpful thinking patterns that could be impacting on anxiety and mood and leading to unhelpful behaviours.

Resources – Challenging unhelpful thinking

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
Worksheet	Therapist Aid – The Cognitive Model
Article	ReachOut – How to challenge negative thoughts
Fact sheet	Centre for Clinical Interventions – Unhelpful thinking styles
	Centre for Clinical Interventions – Challenging unhelpful thinking styles

Learning about mental health

Learning about mental health and wellbeing can validate experiences, reduce stigma and support independence. Useful information can be found online through the following trusted resources:

Resources – Mental health

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
Online	headspace
	ReachOut
	Kids Helpline
Video	Black Dog Institute – Feeling anxious?
	Black Dog Institute – Why am I depressed?

Learning how to solve problems

To reduce the stress that comes along with anxiety, depression and challenges, you can teach young people techniques to:

- understand their problems and feelings
- understand what things they can control
- how to use problem-solving frameworks

Resources – Problem solving

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
Worksheet	Therapist Aid – Problem Solving
Article	ReachOut – A step by step guide to problem solving
Fact sheet	Black Dog Institute – Assessing a Situation/Problem



Improving sleep

Sleep disturbance is common among young people. It refers to difficulty getting enough sleep, getting good quality sleep, and getting to sleep at the appropriate time. Sleep disturbance has a negative impact on all aspects of a young person's life, including their mental health. It is a risk factor for the onset of depression and anxiety.⁷

Resources – Sleep

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
App	<p>Sleep Ninja</p> <p>A free, evidence-based smartphone app to help young people aged 12–16 yrs with sleep problems. Designed to be used in the daytime not at bedtime the app educates young people about the importance of and role of sleep, helps become aware of any habits contributing to poor sleep and teaches both behavioural and cognitive strategies to change unhelpful sleep patterns.</p> <p>Available to download on the App Store and Google Play.</p>
Worksheet/ Fact sheet	<p>Centre for Clinical Intervention</p> <p>Tips on improving sleep.</p>

7. Werner-Siedler et al., 2023

Techniques to manage strong emotions

Strong emotions can be distressing, make it hard to think clearly and lead to unhelpful coping strategies.

Resources – Dealing with emotions

Type of Resource	Name of Resource
Worksheet	Therapist Aid – Coping skills: Anxiety
	Therapist Aid – Distress Tolerance Skills
	Therapist Aid – Emotion Regulation Skills
Modules/ Fact sheet	Centre for Clinical Interventions (CCI) – Tolerating Distress
App	Virtual Hope Box A free smartphone app that offers coping, relaxation, distraction, and positive thinking tools for coping with strong emotions. Available of Apple Store or Google Play



Section 6

Your self-care



Taking care of yourself

Mental health challenges are more common in young people today more than ever. In your role, you may have noticed increased signs of struggling in the young people you work with. To work effectively in this space keep the following in mind.

1. Be supported and resourced

The goal of this toolkit is to provide you with knowledge and resources to support you in your role. However, you'll need ongoing opportunities for support and skill development. Think about getting support from mentors and peers. Consider professional development training opportunities. When you see development and training opportunities, ask your supervisor if you can participate.

2. Have realistic expectations of your role and clear boundaries

Working in this space it often feels like the problems are too big for the resources that are available. Sometimes this can invite us into over-doing and stepping outside the boundaries of our role. It's tempting to respond to the gaps by trying to fill them ourselves.

It's important to think through the consequences and ask yourself:

- What if that becomes a pattern?
- What are the consequences you might face?
- Will you have time and energy for your other role responsibilities?
- How long until you feel tired or burnt out filling the gaps of other services?
- Does this help young people feel empowered?
- Is it sustainable?

Some helpful tips include:

- Understanding what you can do and doing that as well as possible without stepping outside your role.
- Monitoring your stress indicators and acting when needed.
- Getting support from mentors and peers to manage difficult situations that invite over-responsibility.
- Getting support or referring to external services that specialise in this kind of support.
- Working as a team within your workplace to support young people struggling with their mental health.

3. Commit to self-care

Self-care has three key components:

- Monitoring your stress indicators and taking action when needed.
- Seeking additional support when needed.
- Being committed to regular workplace and personal self-care strategies.



Section 7

Appendices



Appendix

Assessing a situation/problem

Stressful Situation

Ask:

1. Is it a real and likely problem I am concerned about?
2. Is the problem something happening now?
3. Is the problem something I have some control over?
4. Is it a problem that will continue to cause problems for me if I don't deal with it?

Yes

No

Use structured problem solving

1. Define the problem
2. List all possible solutions (even bad ones)
3. Assess each possible solution
4. Select the best solution
5. Plan how to implement the solution
6. Implement plan and review process

- Change your thinking
- e.g. this is a situation I can't change, I can get through this, this will pass
- Focus on what you can do
- Mindfulness/distraction e.g. deliberately focus on other things to take your mind off the problem
- Get support



Section 8

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